

Homeowners uneasy over beach easements: "Project will destroy our natural beaches"

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STAFFORD — Beachfront property owners are not against a proposed \$71 million federally funded beach replenishment project, but rather the scale and requirements of it.

"As oceanfront property owners, we support the repair and maintenance of the dunes as needed, where needed," said Mike Logan, a beachfront resident in Long Beach Township. "We are opposed to the proposed LBI Beach Replenishment Project due to its massive and intrusive scale and damage to our property values."

Logan made the statements during a meeting of beachfront homeowners at the Holiday Inn in Stafford with Lyndhurst-based attorney Kenneth Porro. Approximately 120 people attended the meeting yesterday afternoon.

During the course of the meeting, Logan played a slide show of various beach replenishment projects in Ocean City, Ventnor and Monmouth County.

"This effort (beach replenishment) should be supported by the various governmental authorities as a part of their normal public maintenance," Logan said. "We believe that this project will destroy our natural beaches and the character of our beautiful Island that we enjoy."

Most of the people at the meeting expressed concerns about easements the state Department of Environmental Protection is asking them to sign. The signing of the easements would allow for the state to install public beach access points in sections of Long Beach Township including Loveladies and North Beach.

"Additionally, the requested easements provide for expanded, guaranteed and perpetual access to our property by the public and government with no limitation on this or future projects," Logan added.

Porro, who has fought a similar beach-replenishment-based case in Ocean City, said nowhere in the easement agreement does it state the scope of the federally funded project. Porro said the easement document does not state the specific height of the proposed dunes or any details about the scope.

"The government is not playing fair with these easement agreements," Porro said. "Who is to say that another group comes in and wants to change the scope of the project, there is nothing protecting the people who granted those easements."

"A first-year law student would not advise you to sign them," Porro added.

The proposed beach project includes the construction of a 125-foot-wide beach berm and a sand dune 30 feet wide; incorporates 347 acres of planted dune grass and 540,000 feet of sand fencing; raises the beach 8 feet above sea level and dunes another 14 feet for a total height of 22 feet; replaces 7.4 million cubic yards of sand fill during initial construction and provides maintenance work about every seven years over a 50-year period. The project is scheduled to start this spring in Ship Bottom and Surf City.

As a condition of Long Beach Township's participation, the DEP is requiring better public access to its beaches including parking for beachgoers and bathrooms.

"We do not want Porta Potties outside our homes," Logan said. "Local business can say that they do not want noncustomers using their bathrooms. Well we do not want Porta Potties next to our homes."

"There are plenty of beach access points on Long Beach Island," Logan added.

Some residents hold the department responsible for the situation.

"It appears that the DEP is being the fly in the ointment," said Bill Kunz, a Brant Beach resident. "It's not the Army Corp of Engineers but rather our own state."

Porro told those gathered the project would die if residents did not sign the easements.

"No easements, no project," Porro said. "It's as simple as that."

Porro and the residents said that they are willing to negotiate with state officials over the easements, but fear that might not be an option with the state.

"Maybe we can talk to the state on issues that the residents have," Porro said. "We talk to them for a couple of months and if there is no give then we can move forward with the process."

Over the past couple of months, the DEP has stood by its demands saying it will see the project done as planned.

Many of the residents stated that they did not wish to be identified because of fear of a backlash from other residents or officials.

After a public meeting, Porro met with homeowners to discuss the legal options that are available to them in the coming months. During the private meeting, the group set up a budget to handle legal cost.

Some beachfront owners said they would be willing to let the project and the funding wash away.

"Let it die," said Lou Esposito, a beachfront homeowner. "I will do all of the improvements that are needed and pay for them. I'll buy the snow fence and make sure it's protected."

Bill Hutson, a local business owner who attended the meeting, said letting the project die would cause damage to Long Beach Island.

"The idea of opting out of the project would kill Long Beach Island," Hutson said. "This is a project that needs to be completed."

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